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Hermann Balck–Germany's Forgotten Panzer Commander

by Colonel David T. Zabecki, US Army Reserves

General William E. DePuy once referred to German "*General der Panzertruppe*" Hermann Balck as "perhaps the best division commander in the German Army."[1] Oddly, although Balck commanded Army Group G opposite US Army General George S. Patton Jr. during the Lorraine Campaign, he was not mentioned in the 1989 book *Hitler's Generals*.[2] Still, Balck was one of only 27 German soldiers to earn the prestigious Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, with Swords, Oakleaves and Diamonds. DePuy's remark was specifically about Balck's December 1942 series of battles on the Chir River—masterpieces of tactical agility, mobile counterattack and *Auftragstaktik*.

Balck was born in Danzig-Langfuhr, Prussia, in 1893—long after his Finnish ancestors had migrated to Germany in 1120. Balck's father, *Generalleutnant* William Balck, received the *Pourle Merite*—the "Blue Max"—while a division commander during World War I.[3] The older Balck was also a member of the Prussian Imperial General Staff and one of Germany's most prominent writers on tactics before and immediately after World War I. Several of his works were translated into English and used in US Army service schools.

In 1913, Hermann Balck joined the Goslar Rifles as an officer candidate. A year later, he was posted briefly to the Hanovarian Military College. He then entered combat with his regiment. During the war, Balck was a mountain infantry officer on the Western, Eastern, Italian and Balkan fronts, serving almost three years as a company commander. During one period he led an extended patrol that operated independently behind Russian lines for several weeks. Over the course of the war, Balck was wounded seven times and awarded the Iron Cross First Class. In October 1918 he was recommended for the *Pour le Merite*, but he never received the award.[4]

Retained in the small postwar *Reichswehr*, Balck transferred to the 18th Cavalry Regiment in 1922 and stayed with that unit for 12 years. He twice refused opportunities to join the General Staff, preferring to remain a line officer. In 1935, as a lieutenant colonel, Balck commanded the first bicycle battalion in the German army. In 1938, he transferred to Colonel Heinz Guderian's Inspectorate of Mobile Troops within the High Command in Berlin. During the Polish Campaign, Balck was responsible for managing the reorganization and refitting of the Panzer divisions.[5]

Just before the invasion of France, Balck assumed command of the 1st Motorized Infantry Regiment, 1st Panzer Division, of Guderian's XIX Panzer Korps. On 13 May 1940, Balck's regiment forced the crossing

of the Meuse River that spearheaded Guderian's breakthrough at Sedan. When Guderian crossed the river in one of the first assault boats, Balck was already waiting for him on the far bank. He cheerfully shouted to his commander, "Joyriding in canoes on the Meuse is forbidden."[6]

In mid-May Balck temporarily commanded his division's 1st Panzer Regiment. For his actions during the French Campaign, he received the Iron Cross Second and First Class and the Knight's Cross. After the battle at Sedan, and at Balck's suggestion, German tanks and infantry were employed in combined-arms *Kampfgruppe* formations. This was a significant development in the doctrine of armored warfare. Until then, German infantry and Panzer regiments had been employed separately.[7]

General der Panzertruppe Hermann Balck

Following the French Campaign, Balck assumed command of the 3d Panzer Regiment, 2d Panzer Division. In Greece, the 2d Panzer Division broke through the Metaxis Line in April 1941 and occupied Salonika. Balck then assumed command of a Panzer battle group. Demonstrating a remarkable ability to maneuver armor through seemingly impassable mountain terrain, Balck outflanked the British Corps rear guard during the battle of Mount Olympus. Balck complemented armored thrusts by sending infantry on foot through the rough mountainous terrain in wide flanking movements. A contemporary British intelligence report noted: "The German Panzer Regiment 3 knows no going difficulties and negotiates terrain which was regarded absolutely safe against armour."[8]

In July 1941, Balck became *Sparkommissar* at the Office of the Director of Army Equipment in Berlin. His task was to make up for vehicle losses in Russia. Over a four-month period, he stripped 100,000 vehicles and their crews from uncommitted units and transferred them to the combat forces. During this period his oldest son, Friederich Wilhelm Balck, was killed in Russia as an officer cadet.[9]

In November 1941, Balck became inspector of mobile troops—the same position Guderian held in 1938. During Operation *Tiafun*, the abortive drive on Moscow, Balck visited stalled German forces in the field and reported back to Berlin on the situation. In a 30 December briefing, he stood his ground when Adolf Hitler challenged his assessment of the situation. Hitler took issue with the tank losses reported by Balck, insisting the numbers must be much lower. Balck shot back, "You are mistaken: I was there—my figures are the correct ones."[10]

A few weeks later Balck reported to Hitler that the current tank production of 30 per month was inadequate. Hitler answered that he had just been told tank production was 60 per month. Balck replied, "In that case, you've been lied to." At that point Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, chief of staff of the Werhmacht High Command, angrily interjected, "If so, then I'm the liar."[11]

In May 1942, Balck assumed command of the 11th Panzer Division in Byelorussia and was promoted to *Generalmajor* in August. In that position he fully demonstrated his impressive range of command abilities. He emphasized leading from the front to remain in constant touch with the action. His principal axiom was "Night marches save blood."[12]

By December 1942, the German Sixth Army was encircled in Stalingrad. Field Marshal Eric von Manstein, the commander of Army Group *Don*, planned to relieve the Sixth Army with Colonel General Hermann Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army, supported by the XLVIII Panzer Korps. On 7 December, before the XLVIII Panzer Korps could link up with the Fourth Panzer Army, elements of General P.L. Romanenko's Soviet Fifth Tank Army launched heavy attacks at various points along the Chir River, a tributary of the Don. By the end of the day, the Soviet I Tank Corps had crossed the Chir and penetrated 10 miles to the south, reaching Sovchos (State Collective Farm) 79.

When the attack came, two divisions of the XLVIII Panzer Korps were deployed along the river's west bank. The 7th Luftwaffe Field Division was on the left, and the 336th Infantry Division was on the right. To their rear, Balck's partially deployed 11th Panzer Division formed the corps reserve. Until that November the 11th Panzer Division had been operating near Roslavl in Byelorussia, more than 400 miles northwest of the confluence of the Chir and the Don. On 25 November, the division started to move by rail to join Army Group Don. By 6 December, the 11th Panzer Division was assigned to the LXVIII Panzer Korps, although only the division's 15th Panzer Regiment was in position. Balck's 110th and 111th Panzergrenadier Regiments were still in transit and did not close until late

on 7 December.

With most of his combat units still en route from the railhead, Balck and his commanders were making a ground reconnaissance for the follow-on move toward Stalingrad when the Soviets attacked. The LXVIII Panzer Korps sent the 11th Panzer Division a warning order to have the 15th Panzer Regiment prepare for a possible counterattack. In the absence of their commander, the division staff passed along the warning order, and the 15th Panzer Regiment began moving forward.

When Balck got the word, he immediately moved to the 336th Infantry Division's command post at Verchne Solonvski. Contrary to all prevailing German doctrine, he decided to collocate his command post with that of the 336th. Balck then began analyzing the orders flowing in from corps ordering the 11th Panzer Division to throw the Soviets back across the Chir. Balck reasoned that if the threat was great enough to delay the relief drive toward Stalingrad, then simply forcing the enemy back across the Chir would be inadequate. He immediately began working to have the mission changed to one of destroying the enemy. His efforts were successful: the LXVIII Panzer Korps' orders were changed as Balck wished.

Because of the desperate situation, Balck was forced to commit his division piecemeal. Despite reinforcement by the 15th Panzer Regiment, the 336th Infantry Division was unable to prevent the enemy from reaching Sovchos 79. As the Soviets hunkered down in that position for the night, Balck brought up the remainder of his units and planned his attack for the following day.

Balck struck just before dawn on 8 December. The 110th Panzergrenadier Regiment conducted a holding attack against the Soviet front, with the 15th Panzer Regiment supported by the 111th Panzergrenadier Regiment, delivering the main blow against the Soviet rear. Later in the day the Soviets brought up previously uncommitted armor in an attempt to roll up the 336th Infantry Division's left flank. Balck left two Panzer-grenadier regiments to mop up at Sovchos 79 and sent the 15th Panzer Regiment to deal with the new threat. By the day's end, the Soviet I Tank Corps had lost 53 tanks and effectively ceased to exist.

For the next three days, the 11th Panzer Division fought a series of running battles, successively eliminating Soviet bridgeheads across the Chir. The division continually marched at night, fighting during the day, using speed, surprise and shock actions. Balck issued only verbal orders to his regimental commanders, either by radio or face-to-face, and continually positioned himself at critical points of any action.

Late on 11 December, the Soviets made two more major penetrations into the sector of the XLVIII Panzer Korps. After another night march, the 11th Panzer Division attacked the flank of one of the Soviet penetrations at Lissinski. Once that threat was defeated, Balck moved his division 15 miles to the northwest and attacked the Soviet bridgehead at Nizhna Kalinovski.

At dawn on 13 December, the 11th Panzer Division was preparing to make its final counterattack when it was hit on the right flank by a strong Soviet assault. One of Balck's battalions was temporarily surrounded, but he continued the originally planned attack on the Soviet bridgehead while simultaneously extracting his encircled battalion. By the end of the day, the Soviets had been fought to a standstill, although the Nizhna Kalinovski bridgehead was not completely eliminated. By that point, the 11th Panzer Division had been marching by night and fighting by day for almost eight continuous days.

On 10 December, the Fourth Panzer Army had begun its drive to relieve the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Despite being heavily engaged along the Chir, the XLVIII Panzer Korps had the mission to link up with and support the Fourth Panzer Army. To do so, the XLVIII Panzer Korps had to cross the Don. On 15 December, the 11th Panzer Division began moving south toward Nizhna Chirskaya, just below the confluence of the Chir and the Don. On 17 December, Balck's division was prepared to force a crossing, but the Soviets struck first.

Ignoring the thrust of the Fourth Panzer Army, the Soviets launched a massive blow against the Italian Eighth Army farther north along the Don. The Soviet drive threatened to cut off Rostov, at the mouth of the Don on the Azov Sea. Such a move would have isolated Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist's Army Group A in the Caucasus. Manstein was forced to draw heavily from the Fourth Panzer Army to defend Rostov, and that sealed the fate of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad.

The new Soviet drive overlapped into the sector of the XLVIII Panzer Korps, overrunning units of the 336th Division. The crossing of the Don by the 11th Panzer Division was cancelled, and once again Balck's troops were thrown into the breach. The 11th Panzer Division counterattacked on 18 December at Nizhna Chirskaya. It then conducted another night march and attacked at dawn on 19 December at Nizhna Kalinovski. Balck's 15th Panzer Regiment, which was now down to about 25 tanks, came up from behind 42 Soviet tanks in march column. The Germans fell in to the rear of the column in the darkness, and the Soviets mistook them for their own tanks. At the right moment, the 15th Panzer Regiment opened fire, rolling up and destroying the entire column.

Balck's panzers then turned to meet another Soviet column of 23 tanks. Positioned on low ground, the Germans had perfect belly shots when the Soviet tanks crested some higher ground to the front. The 15th Panzer Regiment destroyed a total of 65 enemy tanks that day without suffering a single loss.

By 22 December, the series of defensive battles along the Chir was over, with the Germans clearly the tactical victors. The Fifth Tank Army had been virtually eliminated, despite a Soviet local 11-1 superiority in infantry, 7-1 in tanks and 20-1 in guns.[13]

Tactical victory did not, however, translate to operational success. On 22 December, the XLVIII Panzer Korps received orders to move immediately 90 miles to the west to form blocking positions in front of Rostov. The 11th Panzer Division

moved first and temporarily came under the control of the Romanian Third Army. Two days later the remainder of the LXVIII Panzer Korps arrived and resumed control of Balck's division.

When Balck first arrived in the Rostov area, he concluded "the situation was so grave it could only be saved through audacity—in other words, by attacking. Any attempts at defense would mean our destruction."[14] With only 20 operational tanks, Balck moved his division toward Skassyrskaya to block the Soviets. When he found nothing at Skassyrskaya, he continued moving farther south to Tatsinskaya, which put him in the Soviet rear.

Balck deployed his units around Tatsinskaya. Meanwhile, the Soviet XXIV Tank Corps commander received intelligence reports that there were German tanks to his rear. He reacted by ordering all his units to concentrate around his position at Hill 175. The order was sent by radio in the clear and, of course, was intercepted by the 11th Panzer Division.

On Christmas Day 1942, Balck closed the ring around the XXIV Tank Corps. The 11th Panzer Division, however, had been moving and fighting too long and too hard. It was down to only eight operational tanks, and it simply did not have the strength to break into the Soviet positions. But Balck continued to maintain the pressure, and by 27 December the Soviets had been squeezed into a tighter pocket. On 28 December Balck received operational control of the 4th Panzergrenadier Regiment. With this additional power the 11th Panzer Division was able to break into the defensive perimeter and destroy yet another Soviet tank corps.[15]

For his part in the destruction of the Soviet Fifth Tank Army, Balck received the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross. In January 1943, he was promoted to *Generalleutnant* and in March received the Swords to the Knight's Cross.

In September 1943, Balck became acting commander of the XIV Panzer Korps in Italy. In what appears to be one of his few battlefield mistakes, Balck failed to fully reinforce the 16th Panzer Division, cautiously deciding to hold back a large portion of his forces to counter other landings instead of concentrating his forces opposite the area of the Allied landings at Salerno. He subsequently recognized his error and was moving to correct it when he was injured in the crash of his command observation plane. As a result, the 16th Panzer Division counterattacked the beachhead with insufficient force and failed to push the Allies back into the sea.[16]

After a brief period of recovery from his injuries, Balck — now *General der Panzertruppe* — returned to the XLVIII Panzer Korps and commanded it in the savage 1944 battles at Kiev, Radomyshl and Tarnopol. During those battles, his corps virtually destroyed three Soviet armies. Balck assumed command of the Fourth Panzer Army in August 1944. Counterattacking near Baranov, he brought the Soviet offensive in the great bend of the Vistula to a halt.[17] That action brought him the highly coveted Diamonds to his Knight's Cross.

In September 1944, Hitler personally selected Balck to assume command of Army Group G in the west, opposite the US Third and Seventh Armies. Balck's area of responsibility ran from Metz to Belfort, and his mission was to stop Patton and buy time for the buildup for the planned Ardennes Offensive. In an 18 September conference with Hitler, Balck and his chief of staff, *Generalmajor* F.W. von Mellenthin, were among the first field officers to learn of the coming offensive. Hitler told Balck he had to fight for time. "On no account must he allow a situation to develop in which forces earmarked for the Ardennes offensive would have to be sidetracked to Army Group G."[18]

Balck's army group, in fact, was a ragged assortment of understrength, poorly equipped and hastily trained units cobbled together from Germany's rapidly deteriorating forces. With few resources from which to draw, Balck made brilliant use of dummy mines to confuse and slow attackers. In the end, he accomplished his mission to "hold Alsace-Lorraine in all circumstances," but his job had been made easier by General Dwight D. Eisenhower's 22 September order for Patton's Third Army to stand on the general defensive.[19] The story might have ended differently if Patton had been allowed to go on the offensive. Commenting on his mission and the Lorraine Campaign, Balck later noted, "Patton was the outstanding tactical genius of World War II. I still consider it a privilege and an unforgettable experience to have had the honor to oppose him."[20]

Late in December 1944, Balck was relieved of his command, the victim of political intrigues by SS Chief Heinrich Himmler and Hitler's periodic witch hunts. Thanks to the intervention of Guderian, Balck was reassigned as commander of the reconstituted German Sixth Army, which also had operational control of two Hungarian armies.[21] When the war ended, Balck kept his troops out of Soviet hands by surrendering them to Major General Horace McBride, the US XX Corps commander in Austria.

Balck remained in captivity until 1947. Throughout that period he declined to participate in the US Army Historical Division's series of interviews and monographs, although a great many other German generals did. This may partially account for his relative obscurity and the fact that the US Army's 1950 official history of the Lorraine Campaign tended to dismiss Balck as a perpetually overoptimistic and swashbuckling martinet.[22] In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, Balck and von Mellenthin did participate in a number of seminars and panel discussions with senior NATO leaders at the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

During World War II, von Mellenthin, as a General Staff officer, worked closely with many of Germany's greatest commanders, including Rommel, Guderian and Kesselring. Von Mellenthin was on Guderian's staff during the French Campaign, and for 15 months in the desert he was Rommel's 3d General Staff officer, then his deputy first general staff officer. Although von Mellenthin had worked for some of Germany's greatest combat commanders, he reserved his highest

praise for Balck. In his widely regarded 1956 book, *Panzer Battles*, von Mellenthin laments the portrayal of Balck in Hugh M. Cole's *The Lorraine Campaign*.[23] He also wrote of his old commander: "He was one of our most brilliant leaders of armor. . . . If Manstein was Germany's greatest strategist during World War II, I think Balck has strong claims to be regarded as our finest field commander."[24] ***MR***

NOTES

1. William E. DePuy, US Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Art of War Colloquium, "Generals Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics: Implications for NATO Military Doctrine," April 1983, 48.
2. Correlli Barnett, *Hitler's Generals* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989; Quill, 1991).
3. Interestingly, Balck's father used the English spelling "William" rather than the German "Wilhelm."
4. Hermann Balck, *Ordnung im Chaos*: Erinnerungen, 1938-1948, (Osnabrueck, Germany: Publisher not known, 1981), 673-75.
5. Ibid., 252-55.
6. Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996).
7. Hermann Balck and F.W. von Mellenthin. Taped, translated conversation and biographical sketch, Battelle Columbus Laboratories Tactical Technology Center, Columbus, Ohio, 12 January 1979, 2.
8. F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1985).
9. Balck and von Mellenthin, taped conversation, 343-45.
10. Ibid., 353-54.
11. Ibid., 35-36.
12. Ibid., 403.
13. *Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv*, "Kriegstagebuch Nr.6 der 11. Panzer Div. Einsatz Russland in der Zeit vom 1.11.1942 bis 31.12.1942," (Freiburg, Germany), Files RH 27-11/53 and RH 27-11/55-59; Balck and von Mellenthin, taped conversation, 396-413; von Mellenthin, 211-22.
14. Balck and von Mellenthin, taped conversation, 408.
15. Ibid., 408-12.
16. Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Casino*: The U.S. Army in World War II (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1969), 85-86.
17. Guderian, 376.
18. Balck and von Mellenthin, taped conversation, 372.
19. Ibid., 374-75.
20. Ladislas Farago, *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph* (New York: Astor-Honor, Inc., 1964), 505.
21. Guderian, 394.
22. Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign: The U.S. Army in World War II* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1950), 229-30.
23. Von Mellenthin, 304 and 373*n*; Cole.
24. Von Mellenthin, 304.

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The French Light Armored Division: The Legacy of the Division Légère Mecanique

by Brigadier General Raymond E. Bell Jr., US Army, Retired

Division Daguet was the French Army's contribution to the United Nations (UN) coalition that defeated Iraq during Operation *Desert Storm*.[1] The ad hoc division had no number designation because its elements came from at least five other French divisions. However, the command and control (C2) element and the core formations were drawn from the 6th Light Armored Division (DLB).

One reason for having such a configuration was the French law prohibiting drafted soldiers from serving outside France except as part of NATO. It was necessary to assemble the desired unit from professional soldiers in other formations of the same type. For example, the 6th Foreign Legion Engineer Regiment (battalion) drew companies from the 3rd, 5th and l7th Engineer Regiments.

The principal reason for this organization was the desire to field a force specifically tailored to battlefield tasks the French could be expected to execute. So a mix of units from France's rapid reaction force (called FAR) and other army formations was dispatched to the Gulf.

The division core from the 6th Light Armored Division included the 2d Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment (an infantry battalion using wheeled armored personnel carriers—APCs), the 1st Regiment of Spahis (an armored reconnaissance battalion—ARB), the 1st Foreign Legion Cavalry Regiment (ARB), the 6th Command and Control Battalion and the 6th Foreign Legion Engineer Regiment.

The 4th Airmobile Division, also a FAR organization, contributed the 1st and 3d Combat Helicopter Regiments, which brought *Puma* and *Gazelle* helicopters armed with *HOT* missiles from their own units and from the 2d, 4th, 6th and 7th Combat Helicopter Regiments. The 9th Marine Division from the FAR dispatched the 2d and 3d Marine Infantry Regiments (infantry battalions in wheeled APCs) reinforced with elements of the 21st Marine Infantry Regiment and the 11th Regiment of Marine Artillery (155-millimeter towed artillery).

The FAR 11th Airborne Division was represented by company-size units from the l3th Parachute Cavalry (Dragoon) Regiment and the l7th Parachute Engineer Regiment. Nonrapid reaction corps units included the 1st Infantry Regiment and 3d Engineer Regiment, which also sent company-size formations. The 10th Armored Division, another non-FAR organization, contributed the 4th Cavalry (Dragoon) Regiment (medium tank battalion) as the "heavy" element of the division. Other small combat units of the French military establishment were integrated into the division as well.

Together these units formed what was considered to be a light armored division. However, before it was committed to the battle, the 2d Brigade of the US 82d Airborne Division as well as XVIII Airborne Corps Artillery were attached to the French division.

Division *Daguet*'s Legacy

Division *Daguet* was the first French division-size armored unit to engage in combat since World War II. It can trace its proud, if sad, combat legacy back to 1940 and the 1st, 2d, 3d and 5th Division Légères Mecaniques (DLM) or Light Mechanized Divisions. But just what was this legacy and how did it originate? And, how did the division's performance in 1991 reflect that of its predecessor 50 years ago during its clash with Germany?

Elements of the 2d French Armored Division form up after landing in Normandy, 2 August 1944

Division *Daguet's* legacy began in 1935 when the first light mechanized division was officially formed under sponsorship of the French Army cavalry. A distinction must be made between the development of the French mechanized cavalry formations under the aegis of the cavalry and the tank or armored formations, which had no official patrons and were subordinate to the infantry. In general, tanks were considered infantry support weapons.

Not until 1940 were the first armored divisions formed. In 1934, French Lieutenant Colonel Charles de Gaulle called for a professional armored corps of six armored divisions. Unfortunately, De Gaulle's chance to put into practice the ideas he promulgated did not materialize until six years later when he took command of another ad hoc organization, the French 4th Armored Division, on the field of battle.

According to military historian Colonel Robert A. Doughty, in 1940 French light mechanized divisions were designed to fight in front or to the flank of large army formations. This fulfilled "the traditional cavalry missions, as well as many of the missions which might be assigned an infantry or armored division, within a . . . mobile and fluid battle." In sum, "The cavalry emphasized mobility, the rapid use of firepower, surprise and immediate exploitation."[2]

When French armored divisions were first fielded, the cavalry's light mechanized division was well established. The DLM's cavalry mentors, foremost among them General Maxime Weygand, chief of the French General Staff, 1930 to 1931, and General J.A.L.R Flavigny, who commanded the Cavalry Department in 1933, had early determined to develop a "cavalry" tank. This turned out to be the SOMUA S-35 tank, arguably the best armored fighting vehicle on the battlefield when the Germans invaded France in 1940. The SOMUA had the greatest mobility, best armor protection and most effective weapons.

About the same time, following a suggestion by Flavigny, Weygand sought to organize a division that meshed the traditional characteristics of the cavalry with those of a mechanized force. What evolved was remarkably similar to the German panzer division, although it appears that German developments had minimal if any impact on French military thinking.

Essentially, the division had strong reconnaissance, infantry, tank and artillery elements. Reconnaissance elements consisted of a regiment (battalion) of 45 wheeled Panhard armored cars and a squadron (also of battalion size) of 60 light reconnaissance tanks. There was a two-battalion regiment of motorized infantry "brigaded" with the squadron of light armored tanks.

The principal armor formations were two regiments (battalions) of SOMUA S-35 or Hotchkiss H-35 or H-39 (of lesser capability than the SOMUA) tanks. Each regiment had 87 tanks for a division total of 174.

The well-balanced French light mechanized divisions were placed on the left, or northern, flank of the French Army. The 1st DLM was a component of the French Seventh Army and had the mission of advancing with other 7th Army divisions into Holland to support Dutch efforts to stop the German advance. Almost as soon as French units arrived in Holland, they were turned back by the swiftly moving 18th German Army, which had forced the Dutch Army to capitulate in just four days. The 1st DLM suffered both in the advance to contact and the retreat to France, contributing little to the effort to halt the attacking Germans.

The 2d and 3d Light Mechanized Divisions fared somewhat better. Grouped with the "Cavalry Corps," the divisions formed the advance guard of the French First Army's move into Belgium. The units' initial positions were in the Gembloux Gap to the east of the Dyle River, which was to be the main line of resistance. They then fought to stop the German 6th Army's advance, which had struck through the Belgian fortified city of Liege.

Although the force had some success against the Germans, its position soon became untenable because German General Karl von Rundstedt had quickly unhinged French defenses to the south. The German armored columns struck through the lightly defended, but hilly, Ardennes Forest with unexpected vigor and split the seam between the French 2d and 9th Armies, quickly isolating British and French armies in Belgium from the remaining French forces to the south.

The light mech-anized divisions fought a rear-guard action to Dunkirk where they, like the Brit-ish, lost their equipment but managed to evac-uate some personnel. The divisions, however, never regained their former cohesion and became combat ineffective.

A fourth light mechanized division, the 5th DLM, was organized literally on the field of battle from whatever motorized and mechanized units were available. It fought perfunctorily in the June 1940 Battle of France. The division never had a chance to brace itself for a mission that was almost hopeless from the beginning. Thus ended the short-lived history of France's most modern mechanized cavalry formations, but their legacy continued.

Although neither the French armored division nor the light mechanized division of 1940 survived the fall of France, French armor did participate in action again in World War II. After the Allies had secured a hold in Normandy, the new 2d French Armored Division joined the advance on Paris. From the south of France in August 1944, the 1st French Armored Division advanced north up the Rhone River valley as part of French General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's Army B, later to become the French 1st Army. When the French took up their positions facing Germany on the southernmost flank of the Allied Army, these two armored divisions became the armor components of the French I and II Corps.

These French armored divisions were organized and equipped along US Army lines, and there was little to distinguish US Army and French armored formations from each other except for the difference in language. Of interest, however, is the similarity between the 1944 organization of the US armored division and that of the former French light mechanized infantry division.

The US armored division contained three tank battalions, three mechanized infantry battalions, an armored cavalry squadron (battalion), three artillery battalions and support units and attached units such as antiaircraft and tank destroyer formations. From these elements it was possible to form a flexible and balanced fighting formation under the command and control of up to three brigade/combat command headquarters.

A Division *Daguet* ERC-90 armored car and (*below right*) crew of a 120-mm rifled mortar during a *Desert Shield* capabilities demonstration, December 1990.

The French light mechanized division, as well as the German panzer division, had a similar balance among its fighting elements, although the panzer division had a higher proportion of infantry than either the US armored division or French light mechanized division.

Operation *Desert Storm* and Division *Daguet*

In 1991, during Operation *Desert Storm*, Division *Daguet*'s mission was to advance on the far left flank of the US XVIII Airborne Corps. United Nations strategy called for a strong holding attack against the Iraqi Army, which was concentrated in southern Kuwait; a feint from the sea by US naval and marine forces; and a main attack in the form of an envelopment around the bulk of the Iraqi forces' right flank.

The left flank of the main attack consisted of the US XVIII Airborne Corps, which had Division *Daguet* "under command." The French light armored division configuration with two armored reconnaissance battalions and one medium tank battalion plus motorized in-fantry and a US 82d Airborne Di-vision brigade made it especially appropriate for the flank security mission.

Division *Da-guet*, with its two reconnaissance battalions and one armor battalion, but with two battalions of attack helicopters and three battalions of motorized (wheeled APCs), had only 120 weapons systems armed with 105-millimeter cannon. These armored fighting vehicles were the tracked, 36-ton AMX 30 B2 tank and the wheeled AMX 10 armored reconnaissance vehicle. The added firepower of *Gazelle* helicopters with *HOT* missiles, however, added greatly to the division's offensive striking power.

Interestingly, this division was not considered deficient in armored fighting vehicle strength, but in infantry support. The three battalions of French infantry mounted in *Véhicules de l'Avant Blindé* (VAB) armored carriers were reinforced by the 2d Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, normally consisting of three battalions of foot-mobile parachute infantry. The American airborne troopers, however, did not have access to armor-protected vehicles. When placed under the "operational control" of Division *Daguet,* they rode in open trucks behind French troops.

It is difficult to imagine how US

paratroopers who lacked armor-protected transportation, could have fought alongside French mechanized forces. The availability of helicopters made it possible to jump paratroopers far forward under the protection of French combat helicopters. The 2d Brigade of the US 82d Airborne was the Division *Daguet* reserve but was not needed to stand in for the French combat formations.

As the 1st DLM did in 1940 when it helped cover the French left flank advancing into Holland and Belgium to take up positions to stop the Germans, Division *Daguet* advanced on the left flank of UN forces to screen them from Iraqi counterattack. Thus Division *Daguet* was given a "traditional" cavalry mission much like that envisioned in the 1930s by French officers.

The French division commander organized his forces to exploit the capabilities of each in maximizing their effectiveness. Thus he formed two groups or task forces, one designated Group West, the other Group East. The US airborne brigade formed the division reserve.

Group West was composed essentially of elements of the 6th Light Armored Division. Thus the 1st Regiment of Spahis and the 1st Foreign Legion Regiment of Cavalry performed their flank security missions supported by the VAB-mounted 2d Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment. Artillery support was provided by the 11th Regiment of Marine Artillery from the 9th Marine Division.

This grouping placed the swift-moving, powerful AMX 10 armored reconnaissance vehicles where they had maximum flexibility while ranging far afield in securing the western flank of the division as well as the UN force. Doing so also optimized cohesion by keeping subordinate units from the same major command in one formation. Undoubtedly, these three units had maneuvered together before in many exercises, so it was reasonable to expect them to act effectively on the battlefield.

Group East had elements of the US XVIII Corps operating on its right, or east flank. The group consisted of the 4th Cavalry Regiment from the 10th Armored Division and the 2d and 3d Marine Infantry Regiments from the 9th Marine Division. The formation and location of this group was also based on sound logic.

US Marines did not have their own medium armored fighting vehicles but did have the VAB armored carrier. By placing tanks and motorized marines in an interior grouping, any lack of experience of operating together could be ameliorated while optimizing their inherent capabilities.

The tanks were best suited to lead, and they moved to reinforce the armored reconnaissance troops on their left (west) flank should Iraqi resistance require it. This held true for the right flank of Group East. The US XVIII Airborne Corps was short of armored combat power. Therefore, should the US formation on the right flank of Division *Daguet* have required their assistance, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), the AMX 30 B2s of the French 4th Cavalry, could have been dispatched to help. But the placement of the armor battalion made sense when considering the objectives assigned and the anticipated Iraqi resistance.

Division *Daguet*'s commander organized the formations to derive maximum benefit from their capabilities and to execute the division mission. By operating on the far-left flank of the UN force, the division was able to exploit its chief capability—providing security for the main body on its most exposed flank.

If necessary, the division could bring a great amount of antitank firepower to bear from not only its ground weapons systems but also from its two battalions of combat helicopters armed with *HOT* antitank missiles. It was also reasonable to assume that there would be need for mobile, armor-protected infantry, particularly if enemy troops had to be rousted from fighting positions. However, the large numbers of prisoners and vast stores of captured enemy equipment required additional, unanticipated manpower.

The battle's outcome is now a footnote in history. But for the French Army, the participation of Division *Daguet* marked a milestone in the continuing development of France's light armored force. Looking back to the interwar years, we can see that progressive cavalry soldiers left a legacy of flexibility and balance that failed to produce results in 1940 but reaped rich rewards in 1991.

In the 1930s, the cavalryman was still very much wedded to his steed. Therefore, French cavalrymen showed uncommon foresight in recognizing the potential of armor-protected firepower and mobility at a time when there was a great amount of resistance to giving up the horse and investing vast sums of money in an immature fighting concept. That French cavalrymen organized the light mechanized division even before the material was available to equip it displayed the same insight we need today as we shape the force of the future. ***MR***

NOTES

1. There is some disagreement about whether or not the French light armored contribution in the Gulf War was designated Division *Daguet* or the 6th Division Légère Blindé" (6th Light Armored Division). While recognizing that the C2 element and core units came from the 6th and that the division was known by many as the 6th Light Armored Division, I have chosen to call it an ad hoc formation designated Division *Daguet*. My source for this choice comes from a French publication from the *l'Armée de Terre* titled *Guerre du Golfe, L'Armée Francaise au Combat*. (Publication information not available.)

2. I acknowledge Colonel Robert A. Doughty's definitive work *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1986) about French armor and events leading up to the collapse of the French Army in 1940. I have also used French military documents and works from my personal collection in writing this manuscript. Information on French deployments in the Gulf War came from a French Army officer.

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